

# School Dropout

Another way of measuring educational achievement is to measure high school completion rates for young adults ages 18 to 24. According to *Dropout Rates in the United States, 1999*, the three-year average high school completion rate for 1996-98 was 87 percent in Tennessee, up from a 77 percent rate for 1990-92. School completion rates include students who have earned a General Educational Development (GED) or high school equivalency credential. Almost 12 million adults earned their GEDs between 1972 and 1998, but in 1998 only about 12 percent of those who completed school had done so by earning a GED.

While the original purpose of the GED was to aid older people for whom high school is not an option, during the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a third of the people taking the GED were between the ages of 16 and 19, and the average age of participants was 26. While only 3 percent of Tennessee prison inmates had earned a GED outside the prison, 26 percent of them earned the credential in prison.

In 1998-99 for the first time the DOE published dropout rate figures by gender and race as a part of its yearly report card. The percentages for white students were 3.4 (event) and 14.2 (cohort); for African-Americans, 5.9 and 24.3; and for Hispanics, 5.2 and 23.5. Nationally, Hispanics, who make up only 0.4 percent of Tennessee's students, have a higher dropout rate (9.2 in 1998) than the other two groups (*Dropout Rates in the United States, 1999*). Males, at 16.7 percent, were 31 percent more likely to drop out than females. Racial differences are noticeable in school completion rates, also. Both African-Americans and whites show higher completion rates after 1980 than before, although they appear to have stabilized at around 83 and 90 percent, respectively. The Hispanic rate stabilized at about 63 percent. The percentage of the total who had received a GED was the same for all races at about 10.

People with a GED have better results than dropouts but do not do as well as those with diplomas.

Researchers say that students drop out of school primarily for two types of reasons:

- Factors related to school: lack of motivation because of poor academic performance; low self-esteem as a result of classification as slow; lack of goals; treatment by teachers.
- Factors related to the community: negative role models; pressure from family concerns; issues such as pregnancy and marriage; lack of family support for education (Prevention Researcher, 1999).

Some experts say that the situations that cause dropout are actually set by the time the child reaches the third grade, when their academic problems become evident (Gaustad, 1991). In summary, dropout rates are higher for students from lower income families, from families with a history of non-English language, who had repeated a grade, were older than other students in the class, and who had poor attendance records.

Thirty percent of sophomores who dropped out of school had been suspended, three times the rate of other students (*The Dark Side of Zero Tolerance, 1999*). Some experts believe that suspensions and expulsions are one mechanism used by educators to "push out" unwanted students.

